

# A Guide to Researching Your Montana Property

This research guide is designed to help you compile the information necessary to nominate a property to the National Register of Historic Places. As you conduct your research, you will find yourself visiting a variety of offices at the county courthouse, spending a few hours at the local library, contacting or visiting the Montana Historical Society Library in Helena, and interviewing some long time residents of your area. After you've filled out the Montana Historic Property Record, send it back to us at the State Historic Preservation Office. Once we have established that the property is eligible for listing, we will review, edit, and help with any revisions needed for finalizing your work into a National Register nomination form. Good luck!

If you have any questions, please contact: Kate Hampton, State Historic Preservation Office, PO Box 201202, Helena, MT 59620-1202, Phone: (406) 444-3647. Email: [kahampton@state.mt.us](mailto:kahampton@state.mt.us).

## Courthouse Research

The county courthouse is a great place to begin your historical detective work. Records housed in the County Clerk and Recorder and Tax Appraiser's Offices can be invaluable in your quest to learn about your property.

**Title Search:** If you have access to an "Abstract of Title"--a compilation of deed records for the property prepared by a title insurance company--someone has already done this work for you! In most cases, however, "Abstracts of Title" have been lost over the years or kept by a previous owner.

If you don't have an "Abstract of Title," you must go to the county courthouse and delve into the Clerk and Recorder's deed books yourself. The staff there will show you how to use these records. Every county identifies property by legal description--lots-and-block in towns and by section-township-range in rural areas.

Please trace the changes in ownership of the nominated property, noting dates when the property changed hands, and the purchase price recorded on the old deeds. The purchase price can be an important clue as to when a house or other building may have been built on the property. Complete the title search by listing the present owner of the property and working your way back to the first owner.

**Probate Records and Wills:** As you read the deeds, you may see reference to wills or other legal instruments filed with the probate court. These records sometimes included property inventories. Property inventories often list the major household furnishings and personal property of a deceased person, which can indicate how a house was decorated, the income level of the past owners, and other historical information. Note the date of a person's death if it is given, it will help locate obituaries in the local newspapers.

**Tax Records:** The Tax Appraiser's records will list the current owners, the legal description of the property, a description of the building materials, the number of rooms, sometimes an estimated construction date, and often descriptions and dates of major alterations.

## City Records

**Building Permits:** The City Building Inspector or County Engineer may have a collection of building permits dating back to the early 20th century or even the late 19th century. Few counties and cities have preserved these records, so if you find a permit for the building you are researching, you are in luck! Building permits will often give the date of construction, and the names of the architect, builder and original owner of the building. Make note of all information provided on the building permit.

**Water and Sewer Records:** these record the initial connection of water and sewer lines to buildings within towns and cities. Generally, the hook-ups were made at the time of construction or shortly thereafter. Sometimes the building contractor or architect is listed. Ask for these at the city or county Engineering Department.

# General Land Office Records

**Bureau of Land Management Website:** The Bureau of Land Management maintains a website designed to aid you in your search for homestead and patent information. A handy interactive database and easy-to-use search engine allow you to locate the dates, legal location, and patent numbers for homestead claims filed with the General Land Office. In some cases, digitized copies of the original patents are available online at: <http://www.glorerecords.blm.gov/search/search.asp>.

**Bureau of Land Management State Office:** The Bureau of Land Management State Office has the serial register books, historical indices, and tract book information for each township in Montana. These documents are arranged by township, range and section, and are the original, hand-written entries of applicants for homestead and cash purchases of property from the United States government. The information includes the type of homestead/purchase, the patentee's name, the legal location of the property, the date of application, date of patent/cancellation, and patent number.

Also available are the original GLO survey maps that date to the late 1880s through the 1920s, some with updates and resurveys. These maps were drawn for each township prior to its being released for entry. Together with the survey notes, they offer wonderful historic views and descriptions of the landscape, including existing buildings, transportation routes, and topography.

The BLM State Offices are located at 5001 Southgate Drive, P.O. Box 36800, Billings, MT 59107-6800. They can be reached by phone [(406) 896-5004] or email: [mtinfo@mt.blm.gov](mailto:mtinfo@mt.blm.gov).

**Homestead Records:** The National Archives maintains the Case Reports for homesteads. These files contain information homestead applicants filed with the local land office during the patenting process. They include descriptions of buildings and improvements and their dates of construction; the number of acres broken each year and the crops planted; a list of family members and their places of birth; and for foreign-born applicants, the port and date of entry into the United States. More detailed descriptions of life on the homestead are sometimes given, especially if the final patent application was challenged. Case Reports can be obtained through the BLM State Office or by writing: Old Military and Civil Records (NWCTB-Land), Textual Archives Services Division, National Archives and Records Administration, 700 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, Washington, D.C. 20408-0001. Send the National Archives an e-mail at [inquire@nara.gov](mailto:inquire@nara.gov) or call (301) 713-6800 to request order forms (NATF Form 84) for copies of land entry files. To locate the report, the Archives needs the name of the patentee, the state in which the land was located, the land office location, approximate date of entry, the type of entry (cash, homestead, mineral, etc.), legal location and, if possible, the patent number. This information is available on the BLM website. Be prepared to wait several weeks for the information to be returned to you. The cost for the service is \$17.75, but do not include a payment with your request.

## Historical Societies and Libraries

Every property nominated to the National Register represents or reflects larger trends or patterns of local settlement and history. In order to understand how a place fits into our history, it is important to describe what was going on in the area during the historic period. Public libraries and historical societies hold a wealth of information on historic properties in books, articles and records. Information on local historical events and patterns, and important people will help to define the history and significance of your historic property.

**Local History:** Almost every county in Montana has had its history compiled by local researchers. Many of these county histories were written during the mid-1970s to celebrate the nation's bicentennial. Examine these county histories for information on the specific property that you are researching. Look also for clues about the historical development of the community or region at the time buildings were constructed, and the prominence of the historical building owners. Please list the local histories, pamphlets, etc. that you found useful, and be sure to list **author, title, publisher, date of publication, and page numbers**.

**City Directories:** Most libraries have a collection of city directories that were put out by the J.R. Polk Company dating from the 19th Century. Look up the names of property owners gathered from your title search

to see if they lived or worked in the building being nominated. Scan through all of the directories that you can to see how long a person or business occupied the building. Early directories also sometimes encompassed an entire county rather than a just a townsite.

**Montana Historical Society:** A trip to the Montana Historical Society Library should be your first stop. Research facilities are open Monday - Friday, 9:00 - 5:00; Saturday 9:00 - 1:00; and are closed on holidays. If you live too far away to make a visit, the reference historian can help. Listed below are some of the records housed at the Society. A fee for photocopies is charged. You can request information by phone at (406) 444-2681 or via e-mail by writing to: [mthislib@mcn.net](mailto:mthislib@mcn.net). Send correspondence to: Reference Historian, Montana Historical Society Library, P.O. Box 201201, Helena, MT 59620-1201.

**Sanborn Fire Insurance Company Maps:** If the property you are researching is located within a platted townsite, it may appear on one or more of the Sanborn Fire Insurance Company's maps. The Sanborn Company prepared thousands of very accurate maps for over 200 towns in Montana from the late 19th through the mid- 20th centuries. These maps show the "foot print" of every building and structure within a townsite and indicate whether they were built of wood, log, stone, or concrete; the number of stories; and the location of porches, chimneys and windows. Since these maps were redrawn every 4-15 years, you can also see how the buildings were added to and altered over time. *(To request photocopies of the Sanborn maps for your property from the MHS Library, write to the reference librarian, and please enclose a city map clearly showing the location of your property.)*

**Vertical Files:** Miscellaneous historical information has been collected in many libraries under subject headings. These files include letters, short monographs, newspaper articles, notes, and short pamphlets. Describe your research project to the librarian and something may turn up for you in the vertical files.

**Census Records:** The 1870, 1880, 1900 and 1910 U.S. census records, (the 1890 census burned up!) are available on microfilm at the MHS Library. They list the persons residing in each house in a town as well as the age, occupation, place of birth, whether owner or renter, and length of time in the country. They document the growth of settlements, towns and counties and statistics on such things as agriculture, industry and education.

**Historical Newspapers:** Newspapers are often the best source of information on the construction of commercial and public buildings. Newspapers contain a treasure trove of information on local historical development and the activities of historical people that you'll find nowhere else. Copies of historic newspapers may be obtained at the local library, historical museum, or perhaps the local newspaper office. If you're unable to track down a full collection of historic newspapers, the MHS Library has newspapers for many Montana towns on microfilm. They are available through interlibrary loan.

If you've learned dates of construction for the property you're working on, scan through the newspapers for an article announcing the plan to build (often in the spring and usually six months to a year before construction is completed) and also look for an article heralding the building's dedication or its grand opening. Check also around the new year, when newspapers often listed every new building completed within the last year in the community.

When you don't have a construction date for a building, ask to see the newspapers for the years beginning just before and ending just after the likely construction date. If you strike out, scanning through a number of years of newspapers looking for some reference to the building may be the only hope. This hit-and-miss tactic does sometimes pay off. You will come across all sorts of interesting articles that have absolutely nothing to do with your research, but we promise you will be well entertained.

**Obituaries:** The MHS Library and many local historical societies have indexed the collected biographies and newspaper obituaries for Montana persons. While using the historic newspapers, you'll want to look up the obituaries of the persons associated with the property you are researching. Often the papers prepared brief biographies of the deceased, which summarize their achievements. Be sure to look for obituaries for the women and children, as well.

**Cemetery Indices:** Many counties in Montana maintain indices of the internment records for local cemeteries. These lists can be used to identify where a person was living when he/she died, the date of death, date of internment, and in some cases, the cause of death. Several of these indices are available online at <http://www.interment.net>.

**Statewide Death Index:** The Montana Historical Society Library has this index for all counties in Montana between 1910 and 1966. It lists the persons name and date of death, and after 1919, includes the county where the person died.

**Marriage Records:** These records are available for all Montana, though the period of history covered varies from county to county. The Montana Historical Society has a set of these records, and specific county information may be available at local libraries.

**Biographies:** Many prominent Montanans paid to have their life story printed in state histories. "Subscription" biographies were often written in the most complimentary fashion, but still provide substantial information on a person's contributions to local history. Check for biographical files and these references at the MHS Library and many local libraries:

*Progressive Men of Montana*, Chicago: A.W. Bowens & Co., 1902.

*History of Montana: 1735-1885*, H.A. Leeson, Chicago: Warner, Bear & Co., 1885.

*History of Montana*, Joaquin Miller, Chicago: Lewis Publishing Co., 1894.

*History of Montana*, Robert George Raymer, Chicago: Lewis Publishing Co., 3 vol., 1930.

*A History of Montana*, Helen F. Sanders, Chicago: Lewis Publishing Co., 1913.

*Montana: Its Story and Biography*, Tom Stout, Chicago: American Historical Society, 1921.

*A History of Montana*, Merrill G. Burlingame and K. Ross Toole, New York: Lewis Publishing Co., 1957.

**Manuscripts, Journals, Oral History:** First person accounts of the history of an area, a family or a building are one of the richest sources of information about the people and events that make a property important. Personal accounts breathe life into history, with wonderful stories and details of everyday life that don't get recorded elsewhere. Personal reminiscences from the historical time period of a property's use, or talking with long-time residents will quickly take you to the heart of who lived in or used your building, what events took place at the property and how the architecture changed over the years. Every attempt should be made to verify oral information in the written record, as required by the National Register.

A number of local historical societies, as well as the Montana Historical Society, have oral history collections on tape. These collections, and many others, are available for use at the MHS Library and at local repositories such as county historical societies and tribal cultural programs. A guide to the MHS oral history collection, and transcripts or brief summaries of these interviews are available in addition to copies of the tapes. All oral history materials can be obtained through inter-library loan.

**Archives:** Depending on your research interests, there may be treasures in manuscript collections awaiting your discovery. The MHS collections are indexed in the MHS Library, and because this collection is so extensive, you should plan to personally peruse these holdings. There are also archives at the University of Montana, Montana State University, the Butte-Silver Bow Archives, and sometimes at local historical societies and public libraries. Both the University of Montana – Missoula and Montana State University – Bozeman have extensive archival collections that include architectural drawings from many Montana architects, as well as collections pertaining to families, businesses, and topics donated from across the state.

**Photographic Archives:** Over 40,000 historical photographs of Montana people and places are available at the Photographic Archives at the Montana Historical Society. For building researchers, a historical photograph can be the most important single source of information. Most of the photographs at the MHS are catalogued by town name and subject; you will probably need to look through the photographs for yourself to see if your building shows up! This office is open to the public only in the afternoons, Monday - Friday from 1:00 - 5:00.

May local libraries, historical societies, and museums have collections of historic photographs available to researchers. Also ask your neighbors and former owners to see if they might have some family photos that show the exterior or interior the buildings.

## Tribal Consultation

What is now the state of Montana has been inhabited for thousands of years by numerous Native American nations. It is important to understand that the significance of a place may be different things to different cultural groups. In order to get a full sense of the history of your property, contact the culture committees of the area tribes, and ask them how the area was used by their people, and what historical, cultural, or spiritual associations they have there. If you don't know who to call, check out our Historic Preservation Services Directory online at [http://www.his.state.mt.us/departments/shpo/preserv\\_sd.html](http://www.his.state.mt.us/departments/shpo/preserv_sd.html), and look under "Program and Technical Assistance". Or contact our office at (406) 444-7715, and we can put you in touch with tribal preservation offices, cultural committee members and tribal historians.

## Web Sites

The Internet has open innumerable archival collections and other information to researchers. There are many fun and interesting web sites that can aid you in your search for both specific and broader contextual information. Here are just a few to start with, but play around with your favorite search engines and see what comes up! Remember – information found on the Internet must be documented in your bibliography and footnotes – so keep track of the webpage addresses!

**The Library of Congress American Memory Homepage:** The Library of Congress digital library has a huge collection of documents and photographs available online. From historic landscape photos to biographical information, the site offers downloadable images and text that can be used in researching a historic property. It's fun and easy to use, and is found at <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/>.

**The National Archives and Records Administration:** Connect to <http://www.nara.gov/> for access to research guides and findings aids for the National Archives Collections.

**The University of Montana and Montana State University Websites:** Both UM and MSU offer access to online library catalogs and finding aids for manuscript collections. [UM: <http://www.umt.edu/>; MSU: <http://www.lib.montana.edu/>] In many cases, you can request materials from the University system through your local library's interlibrary loan program.

# The Finale

The National Register of Historic Places requires that nominations be accompanied by maps and recent photographs of the property:

☀ **U.S.G.S. map:** A full-sized U.S.G.S. 7.5' topographic map must accompany each nomination to the National Register. Mark the location of the nominated building, in **pencil** only (again, please do not use stick-on labels). U.S.G.S. maps are available at sporting goods stores and office supply stores.

☀ **Other maps:** If you are nominating a complex of buildings, draw a **sketch map** to show how the buildings are situated on the property.

☀ **Floor Plans:** Floor plans should be measured if possible (to show the dimensions of the rooms), but they need not be drawn to scale. When many additions have been made to a building over the years, floor plans can help us sort out the changes. Please write the dates of each addition on the floor plan.

☀ **Photocopies of Research Materials:** As you conduct your research, please collect photocopies of pertinent historical newspaper articles, biographical sketches, advertisements, etc.

☀ **Current Photographs:** For an individual building, submit 5" x 7", black and white photographs of the nominated building. Be sure to include photographs of every side of the building. If you are nominating a complex of buildings (such as a farmstead, mine site or ranger station) provide at least one shot of each structure. For complexes of buildings, 5" x 7" are recommended for primary buildings, and 3" x 5" photographs are adequate for outbuildings. **Two copies** of each photograph must be submitted: one copy for the National Register and one copy for the State historic sites records. Photographs of significant architectural details and interiors are optional.

☀ **Historic Photographs:** If at all possible, send along copies of historical photographs of the nominated building(s). Although the National Register does not require historical photographs, they are a precious resource when describing the historic appearance and construction history of a property.

The National Register has specific requirements for labeling photographs to insure archival stability. On a separate sheet of paper, please provide the following information for each photo. **We will label them for you. (Do not use stick-on labels or write on photographs):**

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Name of Property     | <input type="checkbox"/> Property Address     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Name of County       | <input type="checkbox"/> Name of State        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Name of Photographer | <input type="checkbox"/> Location of Negative |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Description of View  | <input type="checkbox"/> Date of Photograph   |

The Historic Preservation Office will review the information that you have provided and then contact you to discuss completing an official nomination to the National Register of Historic Places.

Once the nomination is in final form, we will schedule the property for consideration by the State Historic Preservation Review Board at its next quarterly meeting. This board has been appointed by the governor to review all nominations to the National Register of Historic Places. If they approve the property for nomination, the forms will then be submitted to the Keeper of the Register in Washington, D.C. for final approval. The Keeper generally takes 45 days from the time they receive the nomination, to complete the review and formally list a property in National Register.

**Thank you** for your effort and your interest. We hope you have enjoyed the time spent on your research project, and that you unearthed many interesting pieces of information and entertaining stories along the way.